

DUXBURY MARINER

Duxbury Mariner stops presses

In battle of weekly papers, the family-owned Clipper scores surprising victory

By Robert Preer
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

After a two-and-a-half-year weekly newspaper war in Duxbury, an unlikely winner emerged last week. The family-owned Duxbury Clipper accepted the surrender of the Duxbury Mariner, part of the state's largest newspaper chain, Community Newspaper Co., which is owned by mutual-fund giant Fidelity Capital of Boston.

"It's nice to see the little guy win one," said Josh Cutler, the 27-year-old Clipper editor. "I don't want to gloat. I know what it's like to lose."

Cutler, who ran unsuccessfully for state representative last year, took over the helm of the Clipper

last fall from his grandfather, John H. Cutler, who founded the newspaper in 1950 and was editor and publisher until his death at age 88 in September.

Under an agreement between the two weekly papers, the Duxbury Mariner will cease publication this week and Mariner subscribers who request it can receive the Clipper for the remainder of their subscriptions.

The Clipper's victory is unusual in a newspaper business — and indeed a corporate world — dominated by ever-larger organizations. In Massachusetts, Fidelity's Community Newspaper Co. owns 120 weekly and daily newspapers, most acquired through purchases.

"This is very rare," Howard M. Ziff, journalism professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, said of the Clipper's victory. "Usually the chains are the winner or there is a draw."

The outcome in Duxbury has cheered other independent weekly newspaper publishers south of Boston who face competition from larger publications.

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"The chain tried to beat a little guy and failed," said Patricia Desmond, editor and publisher of the three-year-old independent Milton Times. "The Duxbury Clipper is a vibrant newspaper owned by a family."

At one time, nearly every town south of Boston had a locally owned weekly newspaper. Following a spate of mergers and acquisitions starting in the 1970s and continuing through the 1990s, only about a half-dozen remain, some of them recent start-ups.

Independent weeklies in the region include the Canton Citizen, the Cohasset-based Tinytown Gazette, Dedham Times, Walpole Times, Quincy Sun, Norwood Bulletin, and Weymouth Journal.

Publishers of these papers say they survive by maintaining deep roots in their communities.

"I stick strictly to community news," said Beth Erickson, publisher and self-described "Jill-of-all trades" at the Canton Citizen. "I keep it local."

Desmond said, "As an independent, you get to know your market very well. You are the one who is out there in the community and also making the decisions."

The Duxbury Clipper has long had a folksy appeal to local readers. The paper is packed with news items that chronicle town life: weddings, births, deaths, school plays, bird watching, and even accounts of residents' vacations.

Founder John Cutler was as much a town institution as his newspaper. For many years, officials and politicians trooped to his office on Saturday mornings to chat about local affairs.

The Duxbury Clipper and Mariner, besides working out a deal for unexpired subscriptions, also agreed to a joint advertising arrangement. The Clipper will publish ads from other newspapers in the Mariner chain, while the Clipper's ads will run in the Mariner papers.

"It was strictly a business decision," Bob Edelman, executive publisher of the south unit of Community Newspaper Co., said of the impending closing of the Mariner.

Edelman said the paper's circulation has been stagnant. The Mariner

has been selling around 1,000 papers in the town of 14,000. The Clipper's circulation is about 4,000 — roughly 80 percent of the households in town.

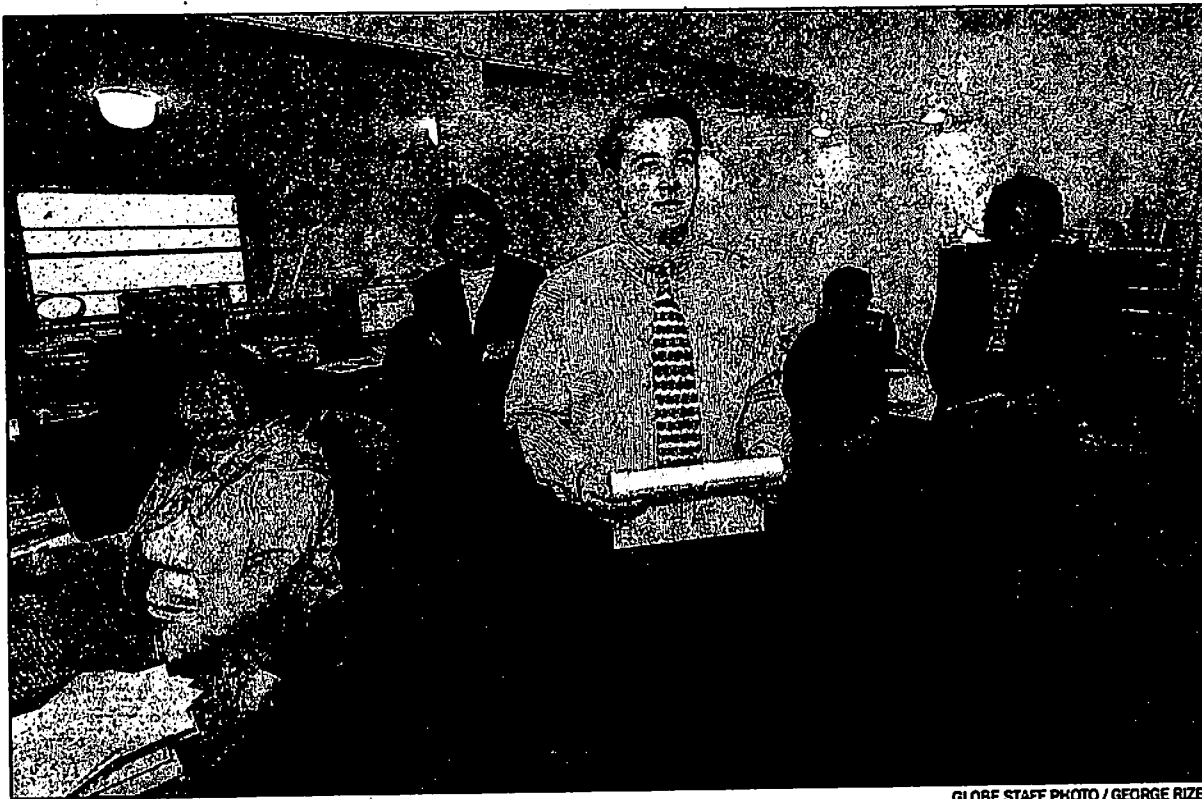
Community Newspaper Co. is the dominant weekly chain south of Boston, with papers in Abington-Rockland, Braintree, Canton, Cohasset, Easton, Hanover, Hingham, Holbrook, Mansfield, Marshfield, Norton, Norwell, Pembroke, Stoughton, Scituate, Sharon, and Weymouth.

Memorial Press Group of Plymouth publishes 10 weekly newspapers, including the free subscription Duxbury Reporter, which also has survived Duxbury's newspaper war. Memorial Press is owned by Newspaper Media LLC, which also owns the Enterprise of Brockton and Patriot Ledger of Quincy.

Memorial Press Group publisher Phyllis Hughes said the market in Duxbury was glutted. "There is barely room for two newspapers. A third was going to have difficulty making it," she said.

Hughes said the Reporter survived by avoiding a direct confrontation with the Clipper. "When there is a paper like the Clipper around, you don't try to compete with them, you

Chain-owned paper departs Duxbury market



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / GEORGE RIZER

Members of the Duxbury Clipper staff, (from left) Patti Campbell, general manager Jane Lane, editor Josh Cutler, Rita Luckey, and managing editor Paula Maxwell, continue putting out the weekly paper.

fill a niche, a different type of coverage. We do more hard news," she said.

Community Newspaper Co.'s decision to start a paper in Duxbury in May 1996 was a direct challenge to the Clipper. The Clipper is a paid subscription paper, and the Mariner, after an initial period in which it was distributed free, also went for paid subscribers.

Unlike the Clipper and Reporter, which are tabloids, the Mariner is a broadsheet. It runs many features and photographs and also uses full color on its front page, which is rare in weeklies because of the high production cost.

The Mariner, though, never was able to achieve a strong presence in the town. It is published out of Community Newspaper's regional headquarters in Marshfield and does not have an office in Duxbury.

Josh Cutler said the Clipper was never seriously hurt by the competition. He said the paper just continued to focus on its mission of covering local news.

"Our idea of marketing ourselves is picking up on the third ring instead of the fourth," Cutler said.

Other independent publishers

say they look for niches that are not filled by the big chains.

"I don't think about Fidelity because I live on a different plane," said Tanna Kasperowicz, publisher of the quirky Tinytown Gazette, distributed free in six South Shore towns. She said she seeks only small advertisers, which are not of interest to larger papers.

Not all independent weeklies have fared well in head-to-head competition with chains. The Citizen of Sharon, published by local activist Lise Rubin, folded in 1997. Rubin competed against the Sharon Advocate, a Community Newspaper Co. publication.

Newspaper chains can offer advertisers visibility in many papers and also can capitalize on greater buying power, as well as marketing and promotional clout.

Canton Citizen publisher Erickson said, "It's difficult to be up against chains, which have so much money."

Independent publishers say they are not expecting to get rich with their papers.

"Do I make a profit? Yes," said Kasperowicz. "On the other hand, I'm not rolling in dough."



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / GEORGE RIZER

Josh Cutler, Duxbury Clipper editor, says paper built niche on local news.